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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the story of an effort in Thailand to reach out to children in high-risk situations by providing them with a library on old train carriages. The Library Train Project was initiated in 1999 by the Railway Police Division within the Royal Police Office. It is aimed at offering education services to homeless children as a way of reducing the crime rate and child exploitation by channeling children to more constructive activities. The library is equipped with a book collection, toys, and computers. It serves as an informal classroom where learning activities take place every day. The children learn to read and write and to appreciate cleanliness, good health, and beauty in a carefully designed and nurturing environment. The paper also highlights creative approaches used by the project's initiator to gain support from governmental and non-governmental organizations, mass media, libraries, and the general public. (Author/MES)

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Small is Beautiful: the library train for homeless children

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Abstract:

The paper presents an inspiring story of a determined effort to reach out to the children in high-risk situations providing them with a charming library on old train carriages. The Library Train Project was initiated in 1999 by the railway policemen of the Railway Police Division within the Royal Police Office, Thailand who also look after its operation. It is aimed at offering education services to homeless children as a way of reducing the crime rate and child exploitation by channeling children to more constructive activities. The Library is equipped with a book collection, toys and computers. It serves as an informal classroom where learning activities take place everyday. The children learn to read and write and to appreciate cleanliness, good health and beauty from a carefully designed and nurturing environment. This paper also highlights creative approaches used by the Project's initiator to gain support from governmental and non-governmental organizations, mass media, libraries and the general public.

Street Children in Thailand

Since the past decade, Thai society has become confronted by an alarming problem of wandering street children. Poverty, broken families and negligent parents drive the troubled children from home to the streets in big cities like Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Pattaya. In 1998 the Office of the National Education Commission reported there were approximately 15,000 street children in Thailand. However, a Christian

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priest who runs a social welfare center for children commented that this figure was just a tip of the iceberg.

Street children usually are in poor health conditions, physically, emotionally and even mentally in some cases. They wander from place to place and struggle to survive from day to day. Some earn small money by doing humble jobs such as washing dishes, polishing shoes or selling newspapers, garlands, flowers and lottery tickets. Others beg for money, steal or scavenge through rubbish for what they can eat, use or sell. They hang out around temples, food markets, department stores or railway and bus stations where they can easily find food and living facilities. They sleep under bridges, on the beach, at construction sites or in any deserted place. Most of them have not opportunities to attend school and become easily cheated. Some join criminal gangs, many others have been victimized through drugs, child labor and prostitution.

Child welfare services provided by the government are not adequate. Detention centers are criticized for their negative approach in looking after children, for lack of warmth and loving environment, and for rigid control enforced by strict rules, discipline and punishment. The growing problem of street children has raised concerns among organizations involved with children. Currently, several governmental and non-governmental agencies and kind-hearted individuals devote their attention, money, time and efforts to help solve the problem, including the Railway Police Division that runs the *Library Train Project.*

The Library Train Project

The *Library Train Project* was initiated in 1999 by *Police Major General Jarumporn Suramanee,* the commander of the *Railway Police Division*, the Royal Thai Police Office. The Library Project, in fact, stems from the *Streetside Railway Police Teachers Project* in which the railway police helped solve the problem of street/homeless children in *Hua Lumpong* train terminal area through a non-formal education program. This program is aimed at teaching basic functional literacy as well as social norms to enable street children to survive in a normal society. With a positive approach, it also helps prevent these children from committing crimes and protect them from child exploitation. Each day a three-hour class took place in the terminal platform or railyard amid the noise, air pollution and possible danger from the busy locomotive traffic.
Being aware of the problem, Commander Suramanee looked for a place more conducive to learning. He proposed to provide a proper classroom using old train carriages. The Governor of the *State Railway of Thailand*, seeing many benefits to be derived from the suggestion, gave two train carriages to the project. A vacant plot of land at the Division's headquarters was set aside for locating the carriages.

Beautiful Junks

Being a library minded person, Commander Suramanee planned not only a classroom but also a library to support the education of homeless children. After four months of modification (April - August 1999), the biggest pieces of junk in the railyard—two old train carriages—were transformed into a small beautiful library (24 square meters per carriage). It is named in Thai *Hong Samud Rotfai Yoawachon,* which means the *Library Train for Children.*

The railway police commander planned, managed and monitored the modification, which was undertaken by the railway police officers and workers. The work clearly reflects the idea of conservation through the reuse of thrown away materials. The commander himself sorted through the pile of old train components to acquire gadgets, posters, and decorating items. They were either repaired or remade with taste and put to good use. Thus the interior of the library was designed in a way that the charm of the old Thai trains is preserved. Such design attracts both children and adults. Children are fascinated by its antique look, and for adult visitors, it brings back the memories of childhood.

The first carriage serves as a library. Books and magazines are mostly acquired through donation. However, donated items are sorted out and only those in good condition and with appropriate contents are selected to fill the shelves. The collection is roughly classified according to types of publications and subjects. It contains books for children and adults. The library is intended for leisure reading, which will encourages children to develop a good reading habit. It also owns some basic reading materials that support education such as textbooks, teachers' guides, non-fiction and reference books.

The second carriage serves as a classroom and area for recreational activities. A three-hour class that was once arranged around the train terminal currently takes place daily in the other carriage of the library. This carriage is equipped with a television set and four Macintosh computers loaded with Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) software. The computers help children learn subjects such as mathematics and English faster in a fun way.

Education Embedded in a Carefully Designed Environment

The library is located in a 200-square-meter compound, which is very carefully designed to educate children. The area is park-like, green and shady with trees. A herb garden provides a natural means of learning. Children learn the properties of different herbs and know how to use them for cooking or healing minor injuries and sickness. They learn how to nurture life through taking care of the garden. Hygiene is introduced when they are taught to take care of themselves, the library and its surroundings. Art is integrated in every design and decoration. Old train and railway components such as a steam engine, lamp posts, and railroad signs, used to decorate the place and put on display, illustrate a museum concept. Sports facilities enable children to exercise, play and improve their health conditions. By working and playing together, children learn about teamwork, roles and responsibility, self-discipline, and public spirit.

Classroom education also takes place every day for about three hours a day, usually in the afternoons. Nine volunteer police teachers, both female and male, are divided into three groups that take turns to teach and take care of the children. The teachers are trained to understand the psychology of troubled children. After the relationship between the teachers and these homeless children is established, the children will call their teachers "Mama" and "Papa." The teachers automatically take parental roles. In addition to teaching, they look after the well being of the children and protect the rights.

In each class, there were about ten boys/ young men. Their ages range from 6 to 18. They are taught and taken care by three teachers who can afford to pay them individual attention when needed. Subjects taught include reading, writing, numeracy, computer skills, civics and drug education. Survival skills and social norms are integrated in teaching. The number of children attending classes varies, as they are free to come and go. The railway police commander pointed out, "Street children have a strong sense of independence because they have struggled on their own long enough before coming to us. We would only drive them away if we impose strict rules on them. So we need to adopt a positive approach and make them trust us. After gaining their trust, steering them to the right direction will not be too difficult a task. Anyway, for those who want to stay, we provide them beds, meals and medical care."

After class, the children can read in the library, play with the computers or watch television. They can do outdoor activities, play some sports, or go to work, if they have jobs. According to the commander and volunteer police teachers, the children have shown signs of improvement. They have become less aggressive and speak more politely. They are more willing to lend helping hands to the teachers such as taking care of younger children. Some have stopped sniffing glue. Those who work and earn are taught to save money by opening their bank accounts. At present, three boys who have been with the project from the beginning have continued their studies in the non-formal education programs of the Ministry of Education.

The Library Train is also for the Community

Not only the homeless children but also the railway police and the community have benefited from the Library Train Project. The library and the mini park are open to the public everyday. Students from other schools come to use the library. Some small children ask their parents to bring them to the library because they found it fascinating. In a quiet corner, some users are found to do serious reading. People who reside in the neighborhood drop in to read newspapers, take a leisure walk, or rest under the shady trees. College students come to organize education or reading promotion activities. Library science students, teachers and librarians pay numerous visits to learn about innovative ideas. The railway police commander tirelessly tells the inspiring story of the beautiful library.

Gaining Support from the Public

When started, the Library Train Project did not have any financial support. Contributions came in other forms. The Governor of the State Railway of Thailand provided the train carriages, land, necessary equipment, and free medical care. The railway police officers give time and labor to modify the library and the landscape. Volunteer police teachers devote their time and efforts to teach and take care of the children. Organizations that provide social welfare and education services for children such as the *Foundation for the Better Life of Children,* the *Mercy Center,* and the *Ministry of Education* offer consultation and cooperation. The commander and his family donated the first amount of money to get the project off the ground.

When the library was completed, its attractive look and its humanitarian and educational objectives drew the attention of the public and media. Contribution in cash and kind began to flow in. The *Nortel Network Company* donated four Macintosh computers to support education. *Sahawiriya,* a local computer software company, offered some educational software. The *Canadian Embassy* donated Can$20,000 through the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (in Thailand). This amount is for a two-year lunch program and expenses of the children under the project's care. Books, toys, clothes, food and cash donations also come from individuals who heard of the project or visited the library. An Australian couple pays regular visits to the library, particularly the wife who, in addition to donation, organizes an informal English and art classes which the children enjoy. Several international organizations have visited the library, for instance, Save the Children from the UK, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and university administrators from Japan. The Library Train Project is also popular among the media locally and internationally. The project has been aired on Reuter, CNN and NHK.

A Model for Community Libraries

Several private and public agencies have expressed their interest in the success story of the project. They feel impressed by the innovative aspects and holistic approach in using the library to solve social problems and develope a positive image of the police force. The railway police have been encouraged to launch similar projects in other areas of the city.

Recently, the Railway Police Division with funding from the *Siam Cement Foundation* has begun a new library project for a slum community in *Bang Sue District.* The upcoming library is patterned after the successful Library Train. It is aimed to serve the community of which many young people are addicted to drugs and the majority of residents are under-educated and unemployed. While railway police teachers administer an educational program, a librarian will be hired to provide library services.

Useful Approaches for Librarians

The Library Train may not offer professional library services as what we see in standard libraries. However, it clearly reflects an important concept of libraries making a difference in the society. This particular library has renewed many lives of street children. The public find the project meaningful and welcome it with overwhelming support.

The project is cleverly designed. While it is based on the community's problems and needs, it has brought about an appreciation of the role of the railway police. It started as a small and manageable project through the maximization of limited resources. Without budget, it adopted the sustainability concept of renovate, repair, remake and reuse.

In designing the educational program for street children, a holistic approach is used. Education takes place in a classroom as well as in a carefully designed environment. A natural means of education used is appropriate for the target group. The library, equipped with print and computers, is provided to support literacy, non-formal education and voluntary reading. Social norms are integrated in teaching to prepare the children to return to normal life.

Institutional cooperation is another strategy used. The project works with several other organizations in dealing with the issue of street children. The spirit of cooperation helps the project initiator and staff to achieve their goal under resource constraints. It also increases the capacity of the project to expand its activities.

Through different media, the project has become widely known and gained participation. In introducing the project to the visitors, the railway police commander always provides well-prepared handouts to the audience to ensure that essential information has been communicated correctly.

On top of everything, all project staff members work with deep commitment to contribute to the betterment of the society. Strong leadership, flexibility and adaptability are demonstrated in the ways they solve problems and accomplish tasks. In the opinion of the railway police commander, librarians also need flexibility and adaptability in designing library services to meet the needs of the community. "Responsibility is not enough! Commitment and service spirit are ingredients for successful efforts. If librarians work with a service spirit, they will certainly earn respect and support from the community," he said.

We, librarians, have been often criticized for our rigid adherence to rules and regulations and obsession to the technical side of library management. Many of us fail to make our roles visible to the community. The authors sincerely hope that the ideas and approaches illustrated in this paper will be useful and adaptable in making library services more meaningful, and that one can start SMALL and yet provide beautiful services.

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